

Absentee voting - Overseas Voting for American Citizens

Thank you Mr. Chairman. Distinguished guests, dear friends, thank you very much for the opportunity to speak to you today about absentee voting in America. Americans voted last month in perhaps the most exciting elections in the history of the United States. The elections were exciting for several reasons, including the very high level of participation by American voters - by young people, by minorities and by absentee voters.

American citizens have the right to vote, no matter where they are in the world. Americans have the choice of voting at polling stations on Election Day or via absentee ballots. Since 1986, members of the U.S. military and other American citizens living or working temporarily or permanently outside the USA can register and vote by mail. More recently, Americans have been able to register online and have an absentee ballot sent to them by mail while abroad. Since 1997, even American astronauts in space have been allowed to vote by absentee ballot!

There are about 4.1 million Americans living abroad. (That does not include astronauts!) U.S. law authorizes Americans to register and vote by absentee ballot in the U.S. state where

they last resided. Each state has its own rules for absentee voting. Most states require overseas Americans to register in advance of elections. In order to register, Americans need to provide the street address and zip code of their last residence in the U.S. Generally, all U.S. citizens 18 years or older who are or will be residing outside the United States during an election period are eligible to vote by absentee ballot. The Department of State, through its embassies and consulates abroad, assists American citizens by providing information on the voting process and the home state's registration procedures.

Acceptance or denial of voter registration is up to each state. Depending on the state, the citizen may register permanently or temporarily, or apply directly for an absentee ballot without registration. Twenty two states require the voter to provide a reason for requesting an absentee ballot, while others do not require an explanation.

Oregon is the only state that conducts all voting by mail. Washington State also conducts elections almost completely by mail, except two counties. Some states, including California, and Washington allow citizens to apply for permanent absentee voter status, which will automatically receive an absentee ballot for each election. Typically a voter must request an

absentee ballot before the election occurs. If an overseas American does not receive a ballot from his state two (2) weeks prior to an election, he can request an emergency federal ballot online or from an American Embassy/Consulate.

Absentee voting can be performed by mail-in paper ballot before Election Day. Some states also allow e-mails, faxes or personal delivery. The goal is to allow those who are absent or not physically able to attend the polls in person to vote.

The results of absentee voting can be significant. California for example has traditionally had one of the highest absentee voting rates. According to California's Secretary of State, absentee votes made up between 20 and 30 per cent of the total votes since 1993.

For overseas Americans, voting is the primary means to participate in the American democratic process. Voter turnout overseas has increased steadily over the last few years, and overseas Americans have historically had much higher election participation rates than their counterparts in the U.S. - typically over 3% of votes cast, although they comprise only about 2% of the electorate.

Thank you very much for your interest in the American electoral system. Congratulations to Aristotle University for its initiative and organization of this symposium.